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Biting the league table that feeds: Reflections on managerialism at work within U.K. university sustainability agendas.

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Abstract

Most proponents of ecological sustainability within universities seem to have found a space where they feel they can more or less shrug off the need for such meaningful critical reflection. There has been a preoccupation with the instrumental and pragmatic task of embedding sustainability in institutions and systems through developing and establishing benchmarks, indicators and checklists; devising skills taxonomies; refining auditing and monitoring tools; drawing up performance league tables.

The aim of this paper is to explore the institutional impact of the latter sustainability performance league tables on current university agendas. It focuses on a narrative critique of one such league table, the UK's 'Green League Table' compiled and reported by the student campaigning NGO, 'People & Planet' annually between 2007 and 2013 through the popular and academic press. This paper offers the proposition that such league tables could be acting as an institutional hegemonic mechanism for social legitimacy through the desire by universities to show that environmental issues are effectively under control. It is proposed that these legitimizing, espoused eco-narratives of the 'carbon targets imperative', 'engagement', can serve as a form of deception to mislead critics of a university's environmental record by merely embracing the narrative as a rhetorical device, rather than as a reflection of or an impetus to proactive, reflexive action. These narratives may also cloak university managers' ambivalence and uncertainty about how to cope with what they perceive as an increasingly important but highly complex issue. In the context of this CMS theme, it is argued that this managerial overarching focus on sustainability league table position, contributes to the broader ethical, social and political tensions and inequities of universities, whilst satisfying the exclusive self-interests of a growing legion of 'carbon managers', 'sustainability managers' and 'environmental managers', in satisfying the neo-liberal institutional drive from their Vice-Chancellors.

1.0 Introduction

'The conventional wisdom holds that all education is good and the more of it one has, the better.... The truth is that without significant precautions, education can equip people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth' (Orr, 1994, p5)

It is hoped that this paper contributes to a wider critical discourse around the way in which the natural environment has been managed through neo-liberal education policies. Neoliberal ideas tend to situate environmental concerns within the logic of economic growth, resulting in conceptualizing ecological sustainability within higher education as instrumental to dominant educational policies focused on creating economic development through new skills, technologies and markets, often at the

expense of other concerns (Gruenewald & Manteaw, 2007). The dominance, and subsequent contested nature, of neoliberal ideas requires that we examine how various neoliberal forms and processes impact how ecological sustainability within higher education is conceptualized and implemented in formal, informal and non-formal contexts, and across scales, from the local to the global (McKenzie, 2012). As neoliberal discourses and practices circulate through multiple social, cultural, ecological, and spatial environments, continuing to track and understand the impact on environment and education is vital, as is strategizing how to respond to its shaping power (Hursh et al., 2013). As Hursh et al. (2013) highlight, some examples of the wider effects neoliberalism has on the environment and education include:

- (1) the ways in which neo-liberalism promotes markets above all else, resulting in valuing nature only for its instrumental market utility
- (2) the re-inscription of people as entrepreneurs and consumers rather than as citizens of larger social and environmental communities
- (3) changing educational relationships between individual and broader conceptions of community within neoliberal ideologies
- (4) the dominance of privatization schemes and enclosure of the commons
- (5) the diminution of government other than to serve economic growth and corporate interests
- (6) the adoption of environmental and sustainability policies that function as institutional green-washing
- (7) the professionalization and institutionalization of environmental work such that it discourages alliance building among diverse groups with environmental concerns (such as Indigenous groups, social justice and civil rights groups, and health advocacy groups)
- (8) the frequent lack of economic critique and critical socio-ecological analysis in environmental education research, policy and practice

Following Hursh et al. (2013), this paper aims to track and understand the power and institutional impact of sustainability university league tables within this wider neoliberal critique. Could an institutional reliance on sustainability league tables contribute to the broader, emergent neoliberal social and political conflicts and inequities of universities as discussed most recently by Acker et al. (2012) and Van den Brink & Benschop (2012)?

In contrast, given the pivotal role of higher education in society and the potential for mutual learning (Scholz et al., 2000) higher education has unique potential to catalyze and/or accelerate a societal, equitable transition toward ecological sustainability (Cortese, 2003). However, as Selby and Kagawa (2010) point out, most proponents of ecological sustainability within universities seem to have found a space where they feel they can more or less shrug off the need for such meaningful critical reflection. In this untroubled state, there has been a preoccupation with the instrumental and pragmatic task of embedding sustainability in institutions and systems through developing and establishing benchmarks, indicators and checklists; devising skills taxonomies; refining auditing and monitoring tools; drawing up performance league tables; and other potential mechanisms for targeting, standardization, measurement and control (see, for instance, Tilbury and Janousek 2007). The approach is one of 'roll up your sleeves and start implementing!' (Jickling and Wals 2008, p.6). As Andrew Smith, the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) head

of estates and sustainable development points out, 'We've got a load of plans and strategies, but what we really need now is delivery' (People & Planet, 2011).

The aim of this paper is to explore the institutional impact of the ever popular sustainability performance league tables on current university agendas. It focuses on a critique of one such league table, the UK's 'Green League Table' compiled by the student campaigning NGO, 'People and Planet'. In 2007, 'People and Planet' ran its first 'Green League' for universities, assessing their environment-sustainability performance across a range of indicators, and then categorizing them as universities categorize student degrees – First, Upper Second, Lower Second, and so on. Since winning the award for the best campaign of the year in 2007 at the British Environment and Media Awards ceremony, the Green League has amassed much publicity, particularly due to the fact that the 'Green League' was published in the popular university weekly newspaper, the Times Higher Education Magazine and since 2011, in the wider circulation of the Guardian Newspaper.

Such a critical focus on league tables could be particularly illuminating as Dobson, Quilley & Young (2010, p.11) point out, 'University managers are very sensitive to league tables; rightly or wrongly they believe that it makes a real difference to an institution's prospects whether it is near the top or near the bottom'. Universities near the top of the table are externally rewarded and thereby legitimized for such actions by having satisfied certain 'sustainability criteria' (no matter well conceived or ill-conceived). Therefore such tables and the criteria within them can institutionally direct sustainability strategy along particular lines. As John Hindley, Manchester Metropolitan University's environmental manager points out after rising to the top of the 2013 Green League Table: 'The Green League has had a great effect for the whole sector and despite being in effect compulsory, it's exceptionally competitive' (People & Planet, 2013).

More specifically, this paper explores the institutional impact of the Green League Table over the seven year period since its inception. As the People & Planet NGO annually audits and widely reports the relative espoused sustainability performance of UK universities, around their own set of indicators, the resultant texts around the league tables along with the respective universities' performative response are readily accessible for such comparative and critical narrative analysis over this seven year period.

Following the spirit of Kafka, this paper could be construed as one of several counter interpretations of the apparent 'one truth' of contemporary mythical narrative texts, such as around sustainability university league tables (Munro & Huber, 2012). As Kalman (2007) reminds us, Kafka pushes the act of interpretation itself into the foreground. In this sense, it is about interpretation, which is not about the one and indivisible truth but about texts (Kalman, 2007, p.51). In other words, this paper provides an interpretation of interpretations. As Kalman (2007, p.57) highlights, it represents an interpretation of the way in which the world around us is interpreted. It follows Barthes (2009{1957}) who argues for 'counter-mythology' as an effective antidote to the dominant, contemporary mythology. This critique of contemporary myths may be seen to be an extension of Gabriel's (2004, p. 872) pioneering study of organizational mythology which recommended that, 'like all myths, (organizational myths) must be approached with suspicion'.

2.0 Conceptual & Methodological Framing

In order to reflect upon the league table changes over seven years, from eight criteria in 2007 to thirteen criteria in 2013, primary narrative threads were identified at different points in time. The specific use of narrative analysis in this paper is to demand an intuitive reflexivity about the deceptive character of appearances—that is going beyond or beneath the surface rhetoric attempting to open out understanding of surplus meaning (Lewis, 2000; Grant and Oswick, 1996). It aligns with postmodern approaches around the idea of incredulity towards any form of narrative closure—and hence an opening for research which investigates linguistic constructions that on the one hand orient interpretation in a particular direction, while on the other suggesting broader and more permissive interpretation than might be the case without their use. Therefore, the power of narrative analysis is justified by the depth of this permissive interpretation and the way it unmasks espoused and legitimising narratives and rhetoric towards a deeper level of meaning (Fairhurst, 2011).

As underlying narrative intentions are often masked in favour of what appears to be more legitimate narratives, this paper concurs with Tourish and Hargie (2012) who advocate the exclusion principle, where espoused narratives can work by excluding categories of meaning from comprehension and discussion. In other words, those who encode narratives and those who decode them may register comparisons and differences between domains, but may also exclude partially or completely other categories of meaning from consideration by reliance on particular narratives. As Tourish and Hargie (2012) highlight, powerful organizational actors, such as the People & Planet NGO, seek to frame categories of meaning for wide audiences, such as university funding bodies, the media, university students, management and academics., this process of exclusion may be particularly important, and is one which has been under-studied in organization theory.

A similar example of such framing is highlighted by Crane (2000) who provides evidence to suggest that where organizations actively implement environmental programs, they are likely to mobilize existing organizational and institutional narratives to frame the process of change, rather than develop new ones. This is, in many respects, is a rational approach to facilitating acceptable and uncontroversial frames of reference for what may be seen by many organizational factions as a "radical" or "left-field" activity (Crane, 2000). These 'eco-narratives' seeking to explain and justify actions in dealing with environmental issues are themselves open to deconstruction. The eco- narratives can serve as a form of deception to mislead critics by merely embracing the narrative as a rhetorical device, rather than as a reflection of what is actually happening within organizations. These narratives may also cloak managers' ambivalence and uncertainty about how to cope with what they perceive as an increasingly important but highly complex issue.

It aligns with the deconstructionist project initiated by Derrida (1967), which highlights both the multiple meanings as well as the intended meanings inherent to any text, and to the categories of thought and interpretation which they sometimes seek to exclude. Conscious use of the exclusion principle in narrative analysis helps us to more attentively seek out such points of ambiguity and provide alternate readings that are essential to a fuller understanding of the Green League Table's impact. This requires an understanding of narratives as rhetorical framing devices,

where framing requires the communicator to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Looking within the league tables, over the duration of seven years, the Green League Table contain such emergent framing, which is manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements (Tourish & Hargie, 2012). Thus, framing is important because an 'audience's interpretation of and reaction to a discourse can be shaped by the frame in which that information is viewed' (Benoit, 2001, p. 72). Through an understanding of the espoused narrative framing, the hidden, masked excluded narrative can be surfaced.

Furthermore, as Tourish and Hargie (2012) argue, many narratives may be weak in unmasking complex relationships, intentions and impacts to multiple organizational actors. In order to identify a suitable root metaphor, which accounts for such ambiguity of intention and impact, this paper concurs with Tourish and Hargie (2012) who argue that context appears to be crucial, and merits greater attention in organizationally situated narrative analysis. Therefore, a pertinent narrative analysis would need to acknowledge and account for the various actors' inputs and responses to such league tables. In other words a pertinent narrative analytical lens would need to acknowledge both the espoused and excluded ambiguous narratives of the Green League Table and also acknowledge the particular relationships between the People and Planet NGO, university managers, and other relevant actors such as academics involved in the sustainability field.

Therefore, a narrative inquiry in the context of this paper, endeavours to surface narratives which are espoused and excluded around the People and Planet's, Green League Table and similarly to critically analyze the respective university actors narrative response, such as from 'sustainability managers' involved in the leading universities' annual submission. Jäger (2001) outlines an approach to data analysis that is consistent with the protocols for critical discourse analysis suggested by Leitch and Palmer (2010), and which was employed in this paper. This methodology also conforms with the approach to metaphor analysis outlined by Cornelissen (2006), Amernic, Craig and Tourish (2007) and Tourish & Hargie (2012). Thus, the pertinent text which was first delineated was the annual Green League Table over the course of seven years. The seven league tables were read and re-read, compared and contrasted with the intent of identifying any emergent, espoused narrative and its excluded narrative coded pair. At this stage, an academic colleague also independently and repeatedly read the text to help determine the depth and extent of the various narratives within the text. The final agreed narrative pair was mapped and examples of each were compiled. This process involved a word by word, line by line and paragraph by paragraph reading and re-reading of the text (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), and the enumeration of fresh narrative categories where clear instances of narratives occurred that did not fit a previously existing category. This task was accomplished by the author laying the narrative categories and examples next to one another, amalgamating some categories and examples, and circulating this fresh analysis for further elaboration to his academic colleague. The process was repeated on four further occasions, until agreement was reached on the major narrative pair as

well as the perspectives of the primary actors involved in the input and output of the league tables.

3.0 Opening Pandora's Box: The Espoused and Excluded Green Eco-Narratives Emerging from the Green League Table

3.1 The Eco-narrative Mask of the 'Carbon Targets Imperative': 2007-Present

The most consistently espoused narrative thread running throughout the league tables over the seven years has been around the primacy of the 'carbon targets imperative': the immediacy of setting and promising to meet certain short-term and long-term carbon targets. As the U.K.'s 'People and Planet' 2011 guide (Green League, 2011, p.17) indicates, 'the biggest emphasis' in assessing the environmental performance of universities is around carbon reduction, in urgently mitigating the consequences of climate change. Purely in terms of specific sections dedicated to 'carbon', it is pertinent to note the much higher relative weighting given to the explicit categories of 'carbon management' and 'carbon reduction' within the Green League Table, (scoring a collective maximum of 17 points up to 2012 and 16 points in 2013 out of a total of 70 possible points around 13 categories). Such focused attention representing almost 25% of the whole points system also combines with the overarching 'carbon targets imperative' narrative broadly interwoven within the other categories of the league table.

In order to understand the reason why the 'carbon target imperative' narrative focus is so paramount to the People and Planet NGO and to respective Directors of Estates, Energy Managers, Sustainability Managers etc within universities (which currently represents the primary external collective actor and voice in shaping the Green League Table methodology through what is called the Green League Oversight Group), is the fact that the wider dominant institutional expectations of many NGOs, environmentalists and neo-conservatives, exhort that society need to change their ways, and often rely on dystopic, fear communications: Unless we change our lifestyles, societal collapse is right around the corner. This fits into the perspective which Newton (2002) describes as, 'technicist kitsch' and the evangelical imploration that things 'must' change because, ecologically speaking, they 'have to', or the uncritical application of existing organizational change rationality such as that of culture change prescriptions. The compounding problem is that the rhetoric of many environmental commentators', such as Krebs (2008), who simplistically say that we are living in a century in which the Economic World View will be superseded by the Ecological World View.

Moreover, it is proposed here that the Green League draws on the immediacy and 'common-sense', doomsday imperative of the climate change agenda, rather than embracing the excluded narrative around the more uncertain and complex nature of wider inherent social, environmental and economic stakeholder transitional conflicts and longer term, systemic transdisciplinary engagement challenges of sustainability. This paper concurs with Clarke et al. (2012) and asks the question of, to what extent such league tables, along with many western governments and institutions, such as universities, their funding bodies (like HEFCE in England) and non-profit institutions like the Carbon Trust are complicit in focusing on knee-jerk, short-term, top-down, technology focused carbon management plans, targets and performance. As the U.K.'s 'People and Planet' guide (Green League, 2011, p.11) warn us,

‘A steep and annual reduction in global carbon emissions is required to avert catastrophic global climate destabilization and keep global warming increases to below 2 degrees.....The UK Government expects all sectors of society to contribute to the 80% reductions by 2050 enshrined in the Climate Change Act (2008) and Climate Change (Scotland) Act (2009).Carbon management is therefore central to the future of environmental management in universities, as recognized by the joint publication by HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHE’s of a Carbon Reduction Strategy (2010) which set a sector-wide carbon reduction target for the first time. Although this strategy applies only to English institutions, similar requirements are in place for institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, for example through the Universities and Colleges Climate Change Commitment for Scotland (UCCCfs) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).....It rewards those universities with ambitious-short term targets as these are crucial to reducing the impact of cumulative emissions and getting an institution on track for a longer-term transition to low-carbon operations.’

In responding to such a key carbon targets imperative narrative around the Green League Table, it is pertinent to note that university management, are focusing much of their attention towards ticking the relevant league table boxes by drawing upon ‘Estates Management Statistics’ data. Looking more closely at the short-term, retrospective and technical orientation here, it is also pertinent to note that such carbon management statistics only measure energy, electricity and heating data from the previous academic year. Such measurements, initially questionable from accuracy, comparability and availability perspectives (People & Planet, 2012), are spurious to say the least not only for the reason that prior to 2012/13 indirect emissions (called Scope 3 emissions) from procurement, travel and flying were not included, but more crucially such statistics are silent in assessing the future wider stakeholder capability and engagement to reduce such emissions i.e. the carbon performance of universities does not even factor in the People and Planet’s own limited stakeholder category of ‘staff and student engagement’ (see below). It is no surprise that league tables and their university followship have focused on prescriptive, short-term techno-fixes and provision around such transport, waste initiatives as teleconferencing, recycling bins, printing quotas, car sharing schemes without any critical reflections around taking account of the various long-term, pluralistic, conflicting stakeholder attitudes, emotions, behavior and lifestyles.

Similarly, universities typically set up discreet ‘environment’ working groups, following league table, compartmentalized criteria, such as ‘the waste group’, ‘energy group’, ‘transport group’, ‘management systems group’ and the increasingly popular ‘carbon management group’ who measure, implement, monitor and control ‘singular’, ‘real’ issues, without analyzing whether such management actually impacts upon the social and cultural context and respective embodied practices of universities. Just reflecting upon the fact that average emissions per head across the UK university sector has actually increased only adds weight to this critique around the primary ‘carbon targets imperative’ narrative. Similarly, in 2012, the sector’s carbon footprint as a whole was still 0.22 % higher than its 2005 baseline (People & Planet, 2012).

Following this paper's critical perspective, it is this paper's proposition that the above urgency of mitigating universities' negative impact on climate change, as legitimized by such league tables, governments and funding bodies, has thus provided a political argument for university 'sustainability manager' technocrats, to implement 'knee-jerk', quick fix, centralized uncritical solutions, from an increasingly judgmental, self-righteous un-questioning perspective. Clearly, more than ever before, university senior managers are embracing the environmental agenda as many top-down decisions can now draw on the unquestionable legitimacy of the climate imperative rather than embrace the complexity and conflict of wider stakeholder involvement, participation and legitimacy. This concurs with Holmqvist (2009), who similarly highlights the possibility that clothing an activity with a seemingly benevolent, legitimizing narrative may be a mechanism of further organizational control over an organisation's environment and its various actors.

An example of this espoused narrative enacted within universities is Plymouth University which has been consistently the highest ranked overall in the UK in the Green League Table: No. 2 in 2007, No. 2 in 2008, No.6 in 2009, No.1 in 2010, No. 4 in 2011 and No. 2 in 2012 and 2013 in the 'Green League Table'. Plymouth University aims to become carbon neutral by 2030 and reduce emissions from its own operations by 25% by 2015. They argue that over 60% of the carbon savings will come from what they call an 'Intelligent Energy Control Centre' that analyses & controls all the energy consuming devices and systems in their public and private buildings. In 2012 they claimed to have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 18% on 2005 levels, despite a large increase in student numbers over the same period. The university identified over 40 carbon reduction projects which they claim to make an estimated £2.3 million in financial savings by 2015 (People & Planet, 2012).

Through national funding body policies such as HEFCE formally linking capital funding with published Carbon Management Plans with short-term targets (actively supported by institutions like the Carbon Trust), and institutionally legitimized through the Green League Table, it is no surprise that universities such as Plymouth are being increasingly driven by short-term technological, systemized fixes and controls with an explicit financial incentive. The questions remains of whether such an institutional incentive and legitimization only furthers the wider neo-liberal agendas of universities, as university managers are rewarded for such narrow instrumental, economic-driven, exclusive managerialism, favoring corporate interests? It is pertinent to note that Plymouth University's explicit strategic aim is to become 'the enterprise university, truly "business-engaging" and delivering outstanding economic, social and cultural benefits from our intellectual capital' (University of Plymouth, 2013).

3.2 The Emerging Eco-narrative Mask of Engagement: 2010-Present.

In response to the above stakeholder criticism, it is pertinent to note that, ironically, the league tables and the increasingly compliant and cooperative universities are increasingly using the language and espoused narrative of engagement, whilst maintaining their top-down, techno-centered, set of quick fixes. In fact, the People and Planet league table 2010 included, for the first time since its inception in 2007, an added criteria of staff and student engagement but dealt with this issue as an add on to the other 10 criteria at the time (People & Planet, 2010).

A pertinent reflection around such an inclusion is that universities could score a maximum of 3 points compared to a maximum of 8 points for an inclusion of a management system such as ISO14001, EMAS, Green Dragon and EcoCampus..... As a review of the league table highlighted, engagement represented... 'only 4% of the overall marks available in the Green League, the impact on institution scores has been limited..... given the tighter bunching of institutions about the mean, these few points will have affected placings in the League table' (Brite Green, 2010). This was indeed beneficial, as many universities unsurprisingly scored 2 out of 3 points if it achieved the following 4 minimal actions:

- University supports an annual 'Go Green Week' or 'Environment Week'
- Inter-halls energy saving competitions (e.g. 'Student Switch Off')
- Inter-halls recycling competitions
- Provision of land for student / staff food-growing projects

It is proposed that this situation of paying lip service to engagement had not changed in 2011, as although the number of actions had slightly increased by 1, the maximum number of points for engagement was still 3 points. This means that universities could effectively make some easy pickings from this list, as explained above, and still effectively score 2 out of the meager 3 points by achieving 5 actions. It is pertinent to note that in 2013, the weighting for this category increased by 1 point but relatively speaking this still represents a slight incremental change to the overall weighting.

Furthermore, such measures miss much of the complexity of dynamic and situational quality of engagement (Bryson, et al., 2010). As Bryson, et al. (2010) argue, the measures here actually obscure the participant voice with no opportunity for a perspective that does not fit the predefined questions. As Kahu (2013) points out, blending such institutional practices with an apparent link to student behaviour has resulted in a lack of clear distinction between the these factors that supposedly influence engagement, the measurement of engagement itself, and the consequences of engagement. This apparent link with student and staff behaviour is highlighted within the rationale for identifying the different initiatives under the engagement category within the Green League Table 2013,

'Universities that play an active role in encouraging and engaging students and staff in sustainable behavior change will be able to make their transition to a low-carbon, lower- energy future much more smoothly, cheaply and quickly. Furthermore, behavior and values learnt whilst at university have long-lasting impacts on graduates throughout their lives.'
(People & Planet, 2013)

However, much of the focus is on institutional practices such as an annual Environment Week; whilst these may be important influences on engagement, they do not represent the psychological state of engagement (Wefald and Downey 2009). By focussing only on elements that the institution can control, a wide range of other explanatory variables are excluded, such as student motivation, expectations and emotions. As Kahu (2013) argues, a clearer distinction would be to recognise that what is considered to be the process is not engagement, instead it is a cluster of factors that may or may not influence student engagement (usually the more

immediate institutional factors). Moreover, it ignores the distal consequences of student engagement such as active citizenship (Zepke, Leach and Butler, 2010): the students' ability to live successfully in the world and have a strong sense of self, as a lens in their conceptual organiser of student engagement. This follows McMahon and Portelli's (2004, p.60) critique that popular discourses of engagement are too narrowly focused on the procedural, as defined by management and so 'fail to address substantive ethical and political issues'. Authors such as Knight (2005) argue strongly against what they see as the imposition of a specific value set, behaviour or 'political orthodoxy' on students and staff. In this context, legitimized initiatives such as The Environment Week could act as benevolent narrative masks to actually further what Mann (2001) highlights as alienating neo-liberal socio-cultural conditions and power imbalances within universities.

Furthermore, if a university was 'savvy' about this and wished to make a spurious correlation between its carbon management performance and engagement, it would certainly endeavor to tick the easy, yet legitimized checklist boxes. It is certainly pertinent to note that a report on the 2010 league table, highlighted that there was a strong correlation between the points gained in this area and overall performance, with all but one of the first class institutions gaining 3 points (Brite, 2010). The report moves on to assert just this very connection '.....this illustrates the importance of grassroots support and behavior change to the success of environmental initiatives on campus' (Brite, 2010, p.5). Of course, purely from a procedural critique perspective, such measures do not even remotely measure grassroots support and behavior change and the short term success of many environmental initiatives could be due to technological, eco-efficiency reasons.

Moreover, it is particularly pertinent to this deconstruction to take a closer look at Plymouth University again as it has consistently scored highly around the engagement category within the Green League Table whilst consistently represents the highest overall 'performer' in the Green League Table up to the present day. In 2010, the 'Centre for Sustainable Futures' at Plymouth University, one of the leading government funded (through HEFCE) Centers of Teaching and Learning published an ethnographic research report, highlighting that their respondents 'unanimously reported that at present, students felt somewhat excluded from contributing to a dialogue about sustainability at Plymouth' (Cotton, Dyer & Winter, 2010, p.2). Ironically, this finding is in the context of an explicit 2006 aim of the university to embed sustainability throughout the university curriculum, community, culture and campus (University of Plymouth, 2006). As they also have been accredited with an international environmental management system standard of ISO140001 and have scored top marks in carbon management and performance, along with other externally awarded, institutional rewards, such as gaining silver status for corporate social responsibility within a university scheme called 'Universities that Count', Plymouth University's self-confessed lack of wider engagement and involvement of one of their key stakeholders, represents a concern not only for the leading universities, such as Plymouth (Cotton et al., 2009), but more importantly 'The Green League' in providing what DEFRA (2005) call an essential institutional context for education for sustainable development to become transformative.

3.3 The Emerging Eco-narrative Mask of Research: 2011-Present.

It is pertinent to note that in 2011, People and Planet may argue that they have also included an extra criterion acknowledging the importance and recognition of wider engagement.... 'Curriculum', which purports to measure the extent of integration of sustainability within teaching and research. Taking a closer look this category is primarily satisfied with policy promises and only scored a maximum of 2 points. In fact, in 2011, even with such easy pickings, only 16 institutions scored full points in this category. Could this be due to the fact that this category only scored a maximum of 2 points rather than recognizing the wider teaching and research impacts? As the chief executive of Universities UK, Nicola Dandridge argues, 'it's important to focus also on universities' wider and invaluable contribution to the green agenda in terms of their environment-related research and teaching' (People & Planet, 2011).

It is pertinent to note that drawing from the 2011 tables, focusing on institutions such as Aberystwyth University, whilst running a number of courses on Environmental Management, gained only 111th position in the Green League Table. Similarly, in 2011, Cardiff University gained only 130th position despite the inclusion of the Curriculum criterion. This is in spite of their substantial world renowned sustainability research profile and reputation. Looking at this more deeply up to the present day, newer, teaching-focused institutions tend to be at the top, while research-intensive Russell Group members are hardly to be seen in the higher rankings. None made it into the top 20 in 2010. Only five of the Russell Group members received 2.1's, 10 receive 2.2's and three – Oxford, Sheffield and Liverpool only manage thirds. Cardiff is deemed to have failed.

In 2013, although the Curriculum name was changed to the wider name of 'Education and Learning' with an increased weighting of 1 point, it still represents a relatively low overall 3 point weighting for this criteria. Pertinently, only two of Russell Group members have still only managed to break into the top 20, with Exeter placed 13th and Newcastle 15th. Bristol (23rd) and London School of Economics (22nd) also received firsts. But six were awarded fails or thirds: Oxford (fail), Cambridge, Imperial College, Liverpool, Warwick and York (all thirds). By People and Planet's own admission, the weightings for this category are relatively low

Why aren't these universities measuring up? As Louise Hazan, People and Planet's climate change campaign and communication manager argues, 'For non-Russell Group universities, being green is definitely a selling point and a way to attract students....that's not the case for Russell Group institutions. Being research intensive means that they are bound to be using lots of water and energy compared with teaching universities.....in terms of policy, I think it could be said, for some institutions, to come down to a certain arrogance that this is not a priority for them' (People & Planet, 2011). This blinkered tick-box perspective, downplaying the wider research agenda in contrast to the quick, internalized, techno-fixes is rebutted by Wendy Piatt, the Russell Group's director general, "Environmental concerns are taken very seriously....all our universities treat their environmental obligations, policies and goals as high priorities. Research in science and engineering, particularly, involves a relatively high level of energy consumption and important work in the environment field is being carried out at Russell Group institutions. Researchers are working on new low, carbon energy technologies at Imperial College London, for example, the development of greener aircraft at Bristol and catalyzing cleaner fuels at Oxford. Such

initiatives are crucial if the UK is to remain a world-leader in global efforts to deal with climate change.’ (People & Planet, 2011).

Clearly, a high level of environmental research does not seem to correlate with the on-going criteria and weightings of such league tables. In other words, universities could in effect develop leading sustainability trans-disciplinary engagement and involvement cultures around teaching and research and be assigned to the lower levels of such tables. As a Cardiff spokesman points out, ‘People and Planet continually fail to credit Cardiff University for the number of core staff we have with designated environmental responsibilities, seemingly because they are not purely dedicated to environmental issues’ (People and Planet, 2011) Seen through this perspective, such league tables, no matter how well intentioned, provide a dangerous signal to universities to pay lip service to systemic stakeholder engagement whilst strategy, policy and resource are directed to a top-down, short term, set of technical carbon fixes which are rewarded and legitimized by the student campaigning group.

4.0 Conclusions

It is proposed here that the benevolent, ecological, espoused narrative of carbon targets imperative has added, to a lesser extent, the benevolent, social, espoused narrative of engagement to its legitimizing function within the opening up and reporting of the league tables by People and Planet. Furthermore, whilst the signed up universities are duly ticking the metaphorical boxes of such league tables (which their university managers have played a key role in shaping), the proposition here is that they are simultaneously enacting an organizational control institutional narrative, excluded from this tick box disclosure. Furthermore, such control narratives within universities could in fact compound any institutional inequities, promoted by neo-liberalism, as highlighted by Acker et al. (2012) and Van den Brink & Benschop (2012). Put in another way, engagement and inclusion may be espoused but the institutional impact of such espoused narratives are disengagement and exclusion within universities due to the priorities placed on other league table narratives such as carbon management within an overarching espoused narrative of continuous improvement of league table position.

The role of ‘sustainability committees’ within universities becomes a pursuit of ticking as many boxes as possible so they can rise up the Green League Table and thereby portray themselves as moving towards a ‘sustainable university’ or the increasingly popular ‘carbon-neutral’. So as Dobson, Quilley & Young (2010, p.11) argue, while there may be issues regarding People and Planet’s criteria and survey methodology, universities seem less bothered about the research niceties and more bothered about league table position. Those that are successful make a big play of the fact, and those that aren’t keep very quiet about it. The ‘reputation factor’ for sustainability issues seems to be very high, so Dobson, Quilley & Young (2010, p.11) find a wide range of institutions proclaiming their success – in the belief that it really will make a difference to how they are perceived, particularly by students. This focus on students could explain the specific attraction of the People and Planet NGO to university ‘sustainability’ managers, as it is pertinent to note that the NGO is student-led. As Gabriel (2005) points out, managers increasingly are turning their sights away from the employees and other actors and towards the consumers whose whims, desires and fantasies they strive to stimulate. In this context, the People and Planet league table, representing a measure of the extent to which universities can highlight

that they are satisfying these desires and whims of students around sustainability, becomes university management's preoccupation. Furthermore, within this pursuit, if universities can manage the illusion and appearance for student actors that more boxes have been ticked around these desires per year, then this becomes a powerful underlying institutional legitimacy for the sustainability agenda for the university. Seen through a different neo-liberal critique, this paper represents a reflection on whether the relationship between the student and university in a sustainability context has been diminished through such league tables, to one where the main preoccupation is for a few managerial, university technocrats to appear to satisfy and 'engage' the student as a customer, in contrast to embracing the complexity and pluralistic citizenship voice of students amongst the many other relatively silent actors.

As one other silent (or silenced) actor, a senior academic colleague (an organizational psychologist) who did actually become involved 'albeit at arms length' on his university's 'sustainability committee' recalled,

'I represented a visible, token academic gesture'

A different sub-text was the agenda of leading players on this committee. As he recalled again,

'When I suggested that surely a central part of a university sustainability strategy is the fostering of student activism, I was immediately collectively lambasted for such an 'anti-sustainability philosophy.... Surely the point is that we want the students and staff to do what we have decided is sustainable rather than questioning this.'

The critical observer could ask the question of whether these rhetorical espoused narratives of carbon targets imperative, engagement and continuous improvement are a masked mechanism to justify the personal political agendas and aspirations of the university technocrats leading such a benevolent journey whilst succumbing to the market-driven financial, short-term destination? Similarly, Milne et al (2009) argue, organizations construct themselves as sustainable or becoming (more) sustainable, while still engaging in pragmatic tradeoffs in their own interest. Vice chancellors, estate managers and so-called 'carbon officers' as well as 'sustainability managers', based almost exclusively within estates departments, are the real winners of such an agenda as they can appear to still conduct their ecological sermon from their office pulpit, whilst achieving their own career tick box criteria. Furthermore, as stated previously many in the environmental lobby appear happy with and legitimise this situation, as this sermon appears to justify their own judgment around those actors which appear to resist any dialogue with such rhetoric.

Ironically, this self-serving 'ecological agenda' in fact serves an economic, quick-fix, piecemeal agenda which at best reduces unsustainability. The importance of such an economic outcome is illustrated by the environmental officer, Grant Anderson, of Nottingham Trent University, ranked number 1 in the Green League 2011, when he describes in glowing terms, how their chief financial and operations manager, Stephen Jackson, as 'like a pit bull' in finding funding for projects that save energy and money. Whilst through re-telling such success stories around the 'triple bottom line' rhetoric, it is pertinent to note that carbon emissions are actually still increasing.

Despite setting an ambitious target to reduce its carbon emissions by 48% between 2005 and 2020 and 10% by 2012-13, they have actually gone up by 24% so far. Similarly, a sector-wide target calls for 43% decrease in emissions from 2005 levels by 2020, but at 63% of universities in the tables they've actually gone up. The average increase per university is 7.4%, with rises of more than 50% recorded at 9 institutions and total emissions from 139 institutions have risen by 3.9% between 2005 and 2010. All this is despite the fact that their capital funding, in England at least, is now linked to the reductions they can achieve against sector targets. Even People and Planet admit the results were 'incredibly worrying' and suggested that, unless there is a rapid turnaround, the sector would not achieve its commitment to cut emissions by 43% by 2020 (People & Planet, 2013).

It is also proposed that the primary focus on the continuously improving carbon instrumental whilst paying lip service to engagement within the People and Planet's Green League Table has provided a legitimacy for universities to sidestep the ongoing debate and discussion on first principles and root values, and so obfuscating understandings, tensions and conceding impetus in the field to the neoliberal marketplace ideology now tacitly embedded in international agendas of universities.

Could such lack of recognition of such tensions and ambiguity explain why none of the 142 universities gained full points in the ethical procurement section of the 2011 Green League? Pertinently, in 2013, Plymouth University scored full points for every policy measure apart from ethical investment. Overall, across the league table, although slight improvements have been made to date, progress in this area is extremely slow. As the compiler of the 2013 Green League Table, Louise Hazan points out: "Only eight out of 143 universities scored full points for their ethical investment policies, and 62 got no points at all" (Bawden, 2013). Considering the fact that Hazan estimates that universities' endowment funds are worth more than 4 billion pounds whilst 8 billion pounds are spent each year on goods and services through many different supply chains, the above pit bull, financially driven mentality, would need to be challenged or even tempered if say a financially lucrative contract has human rights issues connected to the supply chain of the company concerned. Such a challenge would represent moving beyond links between education and estates to include not only academics of different humanities, social and environmental science disciplines but non-academic actors such as local community, government, NGOs with a view to providing greater understanding and reflection of the ethical challenges universities face when attempting to implement sustainability (Orr, 2004). Similarly, ethical investment and endowment is of growing importance to students, as recent protests over Shell's £5.9m sponsorship of a new science lab at Oxford University show. Students, alumni and academics came together in May 2013 to launch their new 'Fossil Free Oxford Campaign' which aims to sever the university's ties with Royal Dutch Shell and other fossil fuel companies. Yet in the Green League 2013, only three universities' investment policies made explicit reference to the ethical considerations of investing in fossil fuels, whereas the majority of institutions explicitly exclude investment in tobacco companies for health reasons. As Hazan reflects on the Green League Table 2013 argues (Bawden, 2013) "It's high time that vice-chancellors put their money where their mouth is on climate change and took the symbolic and financially prudent step of divesting their holdings in fossil fuel companies before the carbon bubble bursts." Similarly, in terms of workers' rights, only 10 universities – up from just one in 2011 – affiliated themselves with the

Worker Rights Consortium, meaning that their supply chains are being independently monitored to avoid products made in dangerous working conditions, such as those in the recent Bangladeshi garment factory tragedy.

In summary, rather than pushing ahead with delivery around satisfying league table criteria, this paper concurs with Dey and Steyaert (2006) and argue that there is much merit, if universities and organizations in general are serious about the complexity of the transitional and transdisciplinary sustainability challenge, in moving away from the performative consequences of the techno-, systemised, short term fixes of such emerging areas as carbon management plans and targets. As Weick (1979) puts it more bluntly, 'Stamp out utility!' In fact, what might seem useful today can become the obstacle to tomorrow's success. As Nietzsche (1974, p.301), argues, the notion of utility is 'the most fatal stupidity by which we shall one day be ruined'. What are the implications of such proposition?

Further research is planned to understand more fully, the lived experience of different university actors involved in university 'sustainability committees' in their response to such sustainability league tables. In order to extend this paper's league table critique, it is intended to specifically focus on the 'top' universities within the People and Planet league table, the so-called 'best-practice' case studies. Giving voice to the various silent actors involved in sustainability across these universities, such research could explore any rhetorical eco-narratives and agendas in much more depth. The exclusivity of sustainability committees could be an issue here. Embracing such plurality, future research could explore possible defamiliarizing narratives and metaphors, which are more inclusive, non-instrumental, contextual and experiential. The inclusion of non-instrumental and experiential within university sustainability discourse, reminds us of Foucault's (1997) notion that universities could focus on more fundamentally on how one is transformed by one's sustainability knowledge and reflect on one's 'metamorphosis' as an aesthetic experience.

The lingering, overarching question and challenge here is whether the People and Planet league table and its international checklist cousins reflect on such critique and systemic questions and make the impact that they espouse. Ironically, in the context of the transitional challenge of sustainability, the People and Planet campaigning group also recognize the wider challenge of developing 'Transition Universities' inspired by the 'Transition Town' movement (People and Planet, 2011). The main question posed here is whether the Green League is a suitable organizational development pathway which leads to such ecological sustainability transition? May be the upcoming major review of the Green League Table in late 2013/early 2014 could take account of the critique developed in this paper as part of a recognized wider critique: '...certain critiques of the Green League methodology persist and we know there is more to do ensure it is measuring each and every institution according to its own merits in a fair and flexible way' (People & Planet, 2013). More pessimistically, this paper offers the proposition that People and Planet could be acting as an institutional hegemonic mechanism for social legitimacy through the desire by universities to show that environmental issues are effectively under control (Boiral, 2009). In this way, People and Planet could be accused of acting as an un-knowing stooge for a lack of reflexive activism towards sustainability by offering such rhetorical narratives of carbon targets imperative and engagement. As an academic within what could be construed as one of the leading university exponents of the neo-

liberal skills and graduate employment agenda, servicing oil and gas corporate interests, I pose the rhetorical question of whether a similar student campaign as Oxford, say 'Fossil Free RGU Campaign' would be as welcome as what the Green League has been to this neo-liberal agenda.

5.0 References

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